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ABSTRACT

Most educational programs focusing on dialect differences are constructed to move speakers toward the standard variety of English. However, dialect study as language study in its own right introduces dialects as resources for learning about language and culture, with potential for language arts education. Systematic introduction of dialect diversity in the language arts curriculum can be used to: (1) challenge popular myths about dialects; (2) offer a new perspective on the nature of language; and (3) develop critical thinking skills. Studying dialects does not threaten the sovereignty of Standard English, but instead offers an understanding of the reasons for learning this variety. Although the themes in a curriculum unit on dialects vary depending on level, topics should be included concerning the naturalness of American English dialects, dialect patterning and rule government, dialect levels, and dialect consequences. Learning about dialects is accomplished most efficiently through active learning supported by a variety of audio-visual aids, several of which are available commercially. A sample exercise about dialect patterning in Southern vowel pronunciation illustrates another kind of learning activity; the range of possible class projects is broad and varied. Appropriate levels for dialect study range from mid-elementary to upper secondary education. (MSE)

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ERIC DIGEST: INCORPORATING DIALECT STUDY
INTO THE LANGUAGE ARTS CLASS

by Walt Wolfram

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ERIC Digest

Incorporating Dialect Study into the Language Arts Class

Prepared by Walt Wolfram

February 1990

Educators often view dialect differences in education as little more than barriers for students to overcome in acquiring competency in Standard English. Thus, virtually all educational programs focusing on dialect differences are constructed to move speakers towards the standard variety. In the process, information about the nature of dialect differences may be acquired by the student, but the acquisition of this information remains a by-product of the process rather than an overt objective. However, it is possible to introduce students to dialects from another perspective: dialect study as a type of language study in its own right. From this perspective, dialects are viewed as resources for learning about language and culture rather than as impediments to education. This may be a novel vantage point, but one that merits serious consideration in language arts education.

Why Should Students Learn about Dialects?

There are several reasons for introducing students to dialect diversity as a systematic part of the language arts curriculum. First, there is a need to challenge popular myths about dialects. The level of misinformation about dialects in our society is, without exaggeration, severe enough to be compared to that of a modern geophysicist claiming that the planet Earth is flat. In order to understand the true dynamics of language and its role in society and education, students need a basic understanding of the nature and development of dialect differences. Students have a right to obtain accurate information about dialects; this provides them with the opportunity to confront current dialect stereotypes and prejudices.

The study of dialects also offers a unique, fascinating window through which the nature of language may be viewed. Dialect diversity seems to pique practically everyone's natural curiosity, and this inherent interest can be seized upon to help language come alive for students. Language comes alive when students actively examine how language varies over time and space, including regional, social, ethnic, gender, and other types of social and physical "space."

The active study of dialect structures further offers an approach for developing critical thinking skills in students. The knowledge of language, including dialects, involves a unique form of knowledge in that speakers know about language simply by virtue of the fact that they speak it. Looking at dialect differences provides a natural laboratory for making generalizations drawn from carefully described sets of data. Students can hypothesize about certain dialect forms and then check them out on the basis of actual usage patterns. This, of course, is a type of scientific inquiry that can help develop higher order thinking skills in students.

Does the Study of Dialects Work Against Learning Standard English?

Studying dialects, including nonstandard or "vernacular" dialects, does not threaten the sovereignty of Standard English. When students realistically confront the functions of Standard English in our society, however, they can develop a clear, honest understanding of the real reasons for learning this variety. Without this understanding, students may retain the prevalent but misguided notion that dialects other than Standard English are simply unworthy approximations of the standard variety. In fact, a respect for dialect variation and the roles different dialects play in American society should encourage students to use Standard English for its socially justified, pragmatic reasons. Furthermore, vernacular dialect speakers, as a by-product of their study of dialects, may apply knowledge about dialect structures to various educational skills, such as composing and editing.

What Themes Should Be Covered in a Curriculum Unit on Dialects?

Although the themes focused on in a curriculum unit on dialects will vary depending on the level of language arts education involved, the following kinds of topics should be included to ensure an adequate introduction to the nature of dialects:

- (1) *The naturalness of American English dialects.* This unit helps confront dialect stereotypes and prejudices as students see how natural and inevitable dialect diversity is in American society.
- (2) *The patterning of dialects.* This unit helps students see how language structures in different dialects are patterned and "rule governed"; this is an essential notion, because the popular notion is that only standard dialects, as set forth typically in grammar books, have real rules.
- (3) *Levels of dialects.* This unit shows how dialects are organized on various levels, including pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and language use/pragmatic conventions.
- (4) *The consequences of dialects.* This unit helps students see the social and educational significance of standard and vernacular dialects, as these respective varieties serve different functions in mainstream and indigenous community settings.

What Kinds of Educational Activities Are Appropriate?

Learning about dialects is most efficiently accomplished through active learning that is supported by a variety of audio-visual aids. Videos about dialects, or videos and audio

recordings illustrating different dialect speakers should be used along with firsthand data collection. Reading can be used to support the curriculum, but the most effective learning will involve the active participation of students.

Several videos on dialects are available commercially, including *American Tongues* and *The Story of English*. *American Tongues* (produced by Alvarez & Kolker) is an entertaining one-hour video that exposes the kinds of prejudices and stereotypes that exist about dialects in our society. *The Story of English* is an eight-part series produced by PBS and hosted by Robert McNeil. The episode entitled *Black on White* (Part I and Part II) is of particular interest for its coverage of the historical development and current distribution of Vernacular Black English. Appalshop, an Appalachian heritage foundation located in Whitesburg, Kentucky, also produces video and audio cassettes featuring Appalachian English speakers, including well-known story tellers such as Ray Hicks and Anndrena Belcher. Interesting video and audio cassettes of folktales told in Appalachian English are available commercially through Appalshop.

Exercises about dialects can also be used to engage students in learning about the patterning of dialects. Following is a sample of an exercise on dialect patterning, taken from Wolfram's *Dialects and American English* (1990).

A Southern Vowel Pronunciation

In some Southern dialects of English, words like pin and pen are pronounced the same. Usually, both words are pronounced as pin. The following is a list of words in which the i and e would be pronounced the SAME in these dialects.

- A. 1. tin and ten
2. kin and Ken
3. Lin and Len
4. tinder and tender
5. sinned and send

Although i and e are pronounced the same in the word pairs given above, there are other words in which i and e are pronounced differently. Following are some of the word pairs where the vowels are pronounced DIFFERENTLY.

- B. 1. lit and let
2. pick and peck
3. pig and peg
4. rip and rep
5. litter and letter

Is there a pattern that can explain the similar pronunciation of i and e for the words in List A and the different pronunciation of i and e in List B? To answer this question, you have to look at the sounds that are found next to the vowel in all of the examples given in List A, in particular those that come after the vowel. What common sound is found next to the vowel in all of the examples given in List A? Based on the pattern you discovered, now look at the words in List C below. In List C, which of the word pairs would you expect to be pronounced the SAME in the Southern dialect and which would you expect to be pronounced DIFFERENTLY?

- C. 1. Rick and wreck
2. bit and bet
3. bin and Ben
4. Nick and neck
5. din and den

Can you state the rule for this Southern pronunciation that explains when words with the vowels i and e of pin and pen will be pronounced the same?

The correct answers for C are as follows: 1. different; 2. different; 3. same; 4. different; 5. same. The rule governing this pronunciation is as follows: i and e are pronounced the same when the sound following them is the nasal sound n.

What Kinds of Class Research Projects Can Students Do?

The range of possible class projects is quite varied, depending on the level of the class and its interests. For example, students may conduct a small dialect survey with community members (parents, grandparents, and friends from different areas) in which a questionnaire about particular dialect forms is constructed, and data are gathered, collated, and analyzed by the class. The class might choose to conduct open-ended interviews to elicit local stories and oral history, tape recording them for later analysis of particular language forms or use. A class project may focus on a specialized interest area, such as slang, in which examples from class members are collected, the language processes used in their formation are analyzed, and the interactional dynamics for peer usage are examined. The types of class research projects seem limited only by the interests of the students and the creativity of the instructor.

What Levels of Education Are Appropriate for the Study of Dialects?

Appropriate levels for the study of dialects range from mid-elementary levels to upper secondary levels and post-secondary education. Some introductory notions about dialects may be introduced quite early in elementary language arts programs, but such an elementary curriculum must rely almost exclusively upon video and audio samples of dialects. A more concentrated curriculum focusing on details of dialect development is appropriate for upper level secondary education, but this program must also be strongly supported by audio-visuals. While the best educational level for introducing dialects may not yet be determined, it is apparent that language arts education can no longer afford to ignore the study of dialects. Students have much to gain and nothing to lose by studying the fascinating topic of dialect differences in American society.

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Resources

- Appalshop, Marketing and Sales, 306 Madison Street, Whitesburg, KY 41858 or (606) 633-0108.
- The Center for New American Media, 524 Broadway, Second Floor, New York, NY 10012-4408. (*American Tongues*)